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CONSEQUENCES OF UNSCIENTIFIC FISHING FOR ALASKA POLLACK IN THE ENCLAVE OF THE SEA OF OKHOTSK

(Submitted by the delegation of the Russian Federation)

Since the early 1960s, Russia has been fishing for Alaska pollack in the Sea of Okhotsk. Its fishing activities have been conducted on the basis of scientific data, ensuring compliance with stock conservation and management measures and optimal utilization of the stocks concerned.

Annual scientific expeditions to study the reproductive capacity of Alaska pollack, to count young fish and to conduct trawl-mounted acoustic surveys to assess commercial stocks have made it possible to determine the total allowable catch and to develop measures for the conservation of stocks both of Alaska pollack, in accordance with its biological status, and of the commercial species associated with Alaska pollack: herring, halibut and certain mammals.

The system for the conservation of the Sea of Okhotsk Alaska pollack stocks is based on the precautionary approach and provides for the following principal measures to regulate their exploitation:

1. The total allowable catch for Alaska pollack is established for the Sea as a whole and divided up among the various fishing areas. As in the past, this includes the allocation of catch quotas within the 200-mile zone of the Russian Federation to a number of other countries, on the basis of bilateral agreements and the principle of the maintenance of traditions.

2. Specific fishing grounds are identified for each type of vessel, taking into consideration the incidental catch of species associated with Alaska pollack.

3. The fishing season is limited.

4. Fishing is suspended during the intensive spawning period.

5. There are restrictions on fishing gear and methods.

6. Conservation zones are established in areas where Alaska pollack are most densely concentrated and the movement of transport vessels and other shipping operations are prohibited in those areas.

7. There is a total prohibition on the fishing of Alaska pollack in the central part (enclave) of the Sea of Okhotsk.

The central part of the Sea (the enclave) is of particular importance for regulating the fishing of Alaska pollack in the Sea of Okhotsk since it is there that the subpopulations of Alaska pollack which reproduce in the north-west, east and north of the Sea intermingle. It is because the mixing of the different subpopulations takes place in this area that a permanent ban on fishing was imposed here. This ban is observed both by the fishing fleet of the Russian Federation and by countries which have traditionally fished in the Sea of Okhotsk.

Since 1991, however, vessels of a number of States have been carrying out unscientific fishing of Alaska pollack in the central region of the Sea, without consulting the coastal State about measures essential for conservation. The Alaska pollack in question reproduce in spawning grounds lying within the exclusive economic zone of the Russian Federation. These fishing practices have destroyed the entire system of measures for the conservation and management of Alaska pollack stocks.

Thus, through unregulated fishing, the total Alaska pollack catch in 1992 alone exceeded by one and a half times the total allowable catch recommended by scientists. The enclave is also being used by these vessels for illegal fishing in waters of the Russian 200-mile zone adjacent to the enclave.

Because of over-fishing, scientists were obliged to reduce the total allowable catch in the Russian zone in 1992 and 1993 in order to prevent spawning stocks from being totally eliminated over the next few years, as is already happening in the Bering Sea. This reduction in the total allowable catch aroused protests from Russian fishermen.

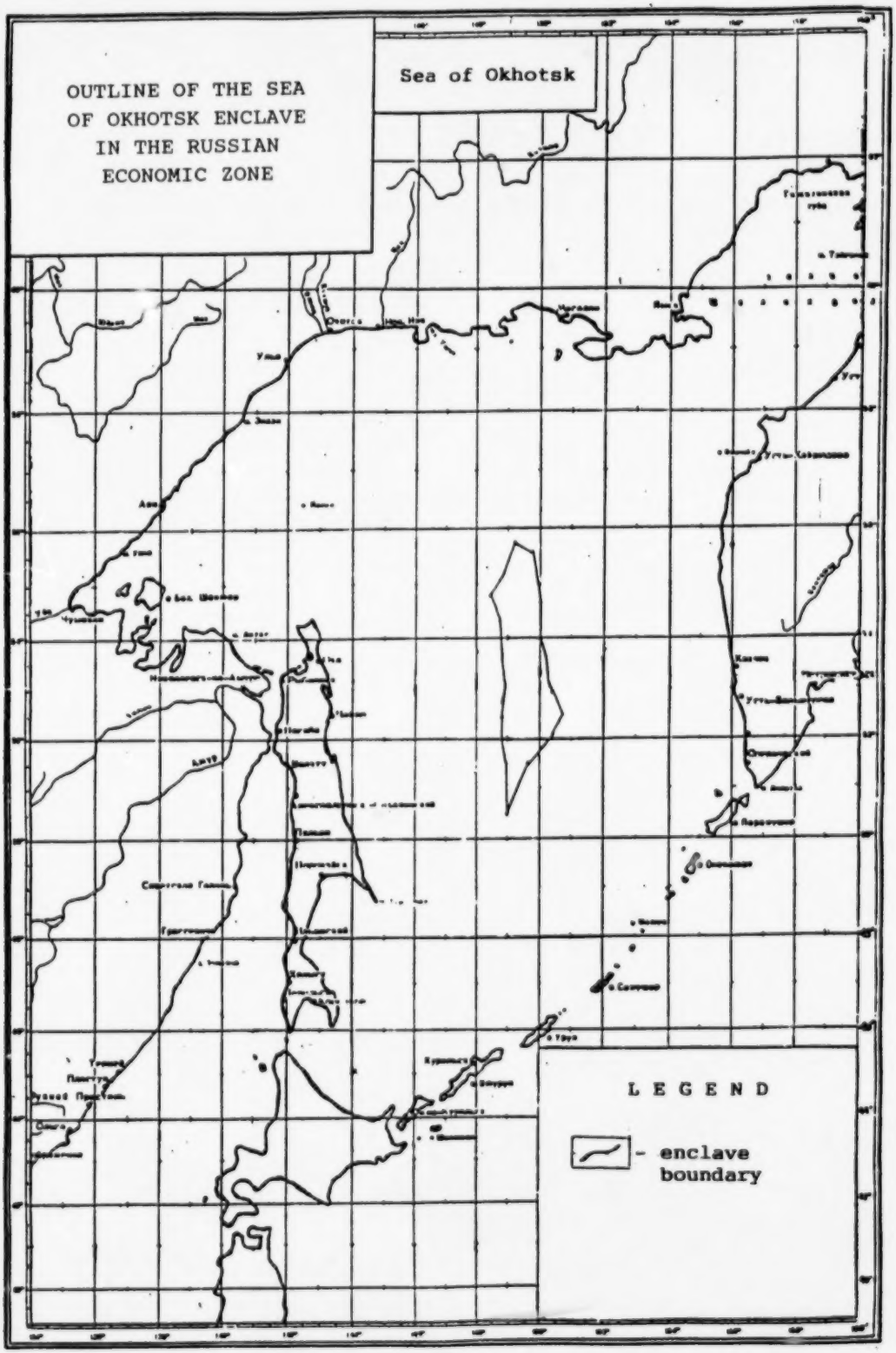
The continued unscientific fishing for Alaska pollack in the central part of the Sea, conducted without regard for essential stock conservation measures, will inevitably lead to the loss of the reproductive capacity of Alaska pollack in their primary spawning grounds in the Sea of Okhotsk, and to a long-term decline in fishing stocks, with severe social consequences for the indigenous peoples and fishermen of the Russian Far East.

Since the concentrations of Alaska pollack migrating to the central part of the Sea of Okhotsk form only part of the single stock of the Sea of Okhotsk, essential measures for the conservation of Alaska pollack and regulations for optimal utilization must be worked out by the coastal State on the basis of comprehensive scientific data.

In addition, unscientific fishing for Alaska pollack in the central part of the Sea, conducted without regard for essential stock conservation measures, could also be detrimental to stocks of other commercial species which spend certain periods of their life cycle in this area, namely, herring, halibut, salmon, seals, fur seals and sea lions. These species may get caught in the nets during trawling for Alaska pollack. For example, according to observations made by Russian scientists between December 1992 and February 1993, groups of as many as 40 and 50 fur seals are constantly encountered in the area of this fishing operation. They have been known to get caught in the trawls. The decline in recent years in stocks of mammals is also noteworthy and could be attributable to changes in the ecology of their high seas habitat where previously there had been no fishing.

Consequently, unscientific fishing for Alaska pollack in the central part of the Sea, conducted without regard for stock conservation measures, not only destroys the stocks of the most important commercial species for the Russian fishing industry, but also endangers the stocks of many species associated with Alaska pollack through their multi-species trophic links, and is therefore damaging to the entire ecosystem of the Sea of Okhotsk.

If unscientific fishing continues in the enclave, conducted without regard for the stock conservation measures elaborated by the coastal State, it could lead to the destruction of the entire ecosystem of the most productive sea in the world's oceans.


OUTLINE OF THE SEA
OF OKHOTSK ENCLAVE
IN THE RUSSIAN
ECONOMIC ZONE
Sea of Okhotsk
LEGEND
- enclave
boundary